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# CANNON

DORDT COLLEGE

SIOUX CENTER

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VOL. I :- NO. 4

EDITORIAL —:—

Karl Neerhof and Jake Van Breda

## The Christian and The Film Arts

To find out "where it's really at" in America, one need only to notice the mood of the audience as it files out of the neighborhood theatre. A careful observer notes the characteristic intense tone of words, the first determined pull from a cigarette, the lead shoes on accelerator pedals, and the hesitant, despairing spirit of the mass as it emerges from fantasy to reality.

For you see, American movie-goers are desperately searching for an image which to idolize and emulate. The film industry, preying on such desires, provides ideal representations of perverted life styles. The viewer clings to these Hollywood-constructed Baals because they supposedly offer the only alternative to being irrelevant, passed by, forgotten. The frustrated viewer exhausts his energy searching for one character who he can portray for the coming week, or his own ideal from the attributes of several characters. The sewer worker's hour of joy begins as he is allowed, with John Wayne, to ride through the sunshine across an open prairie. The weary housewife, whom even Geritol can't help, finds hedonistic heaven in the theatre as she projects herself into the starlet's role—teasingly ignoring the efforts of scores of men who risk death for the mere touch of her hand. The impact of the two-hour flick on America is awesome.

The Christian, entering the theatre, engages in hand to hand combat with the Devil on his own ground. "Jesus Christ?" "Wasn't he the star of 'The

Greatest Story Ever Told?" "Worship Him?" "Are you kidding?" "He got killed."

It is to a money-crazed, fornication-minded film industry that the Christ-follower must present a meaningful alternative. The vulgarity, plasticity and "last chance" appeal to sexism, so vivid in modern productions, leads the Christian to exclaim in confusion along with Mary Magdalene: "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have placed him" (John 20:13).

There is a heavy burden upon the shoulders of the Christians who write and produce films and plays. They stand over against the monstrous Hollywood movie industry, with its millions of dollars and pick of the talented people, and try, with their shoestring budgets and amateur talent, to produce meaningful Christian films. Without the backing of Christ their mission would seem hopeless. With little else but faith and a sense of calling to go on, these people keep on trying. They try, in their productions to portray reality the way the Christian sees it, which means that they try to portray life's spiritual struggle as well as its physical struggle. They have to try to make Christianity an integral part of their production and not something artificial that can be added or deleted from the production without changing the whole thing. Through their productions they have to strive to instruct as well as entertain their viewers if they want to have a truly great production.

The Christian viewer of a play or a film also has certain responsibilities. He demonstrates his responsibility by choosing what kind of production he will endorse. He is also responsible for evaluating the production because, as he is a Christian, he can never view a production "neutrally". Being a Christian makes his view biased to start with. He has to accept or reject the portrayal of life presented in the productions he views. The productions the Christian views should, while entertaining him, also give him a chance to gain a deeper understanding of life.

It is imperative for the Christian community to produce responsible critics whose task it will be to evaluate productions in the light of the current trends and then to pass on his knowledge on to the rest of the Christian community. The Christian today needs all the help he can get to be able to discern the spirits of our time, for as it says in the book of Revelation, in the last days even the strong Christian has to be on guard against false prophets. The Christian critic should also inform his fellow Christians of worthwhile productions which are worthy of support by the rest of the Christian community.

It is only through a strong united front by the Christian writer, producer, viewer and critic that we can hope to make any impact upon the trend of the movie industry and bring it to the glory of, not man, but God, and change it from an escape from reality to a help in order to face reality.

## Accidents for God

by James Koldenhoven

If you were a Roman of the Eastern Empire in 6 A.D., you would know of Theodora. She was a mime superstar of no less reputation than our own Barbara Streisand. Mention Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor, John Wayne, or Dustin Hoffman, and you have testified to the presence of modern acting personalities and bodies. Hero or anti-hero, look at it the way you want, Theodora is still with us. So admired was Theodora that she could choose to marry the Emperor, Justinian. Our Grace Kelly chose to marry the Prince of Monaco.

That's only one impediment to a responsible development of God's Word for film. One response after another to God's Film World (historically an extension of drama) has focused irresponsibly on peripheral elements of the art, leaving the most important development to accident. Ironically, but I say that with a smile, the art has developed in spite of misdirection. Permit me to explain what I mean by saying film arts are an accident of irresponsibility.

Whether it's Nicholas Ray ("Rebel Without a Cause," 1955), Robert Wise ("West Side Story," 1960), Robert Rossen ("The Hustler," 1961), Elia Kazan ("Splendor in the Grass," 1961), David Lean ("Lawrence of Arabia," 1962), or more recent examples, film directors have capitulated to some secondary focus, rather than a vital concern for developing the film art in terms of God's law. But they do respond to God's created order for that particular artistic expression, developing it in spite of their secondary focus. The accident of irresponsibility.

Secondary responses turned primary for the humanist director are many. There is always the box office return in dollars and cents, sometimes the all-devouring incentive for the producers, sometimes a latent but powerful influence on the directors and editors. Not that financial consideration can ever be ignored—but responsibility is necessary here, too. My point is that often the material return gets out of perspective, effecting all the other aspects of film making. Like soliciting the prurient interests of a sick society. If sensuality will sell, let's make a triple-X film.

The same critique may be made of the director and producer who plant the superstar in a trite statement, in a gawdy context, and in an aura of splendor and glamor. Which is the prominent focus? Talent or money? (Note the current run of Elliott Gould films.) Or take the quasi-worship that goes on in films which focus on technical sophistication or current fetishes. One suspects that the technicolor, wide-screen spectacle of "The Bible" (John Huston, 1966) was intended to draw a large crowd of pseudo-Christian, rather than an honest attempt to make the film representative of Biblical history. The unthinking patriotism of "From Here to Eternity" (Fred Zinnemann, 1953) attracted a large box office nearly twenty years ago. That fetish has been replaced by the anti-patriotic films such as "M\*A\*S\*H" (Bob Altman, 1970). A new fetish, a new audience, a new box office.

We are inclined to reduce the focus of the humanist film maker to material and selfish interests only. And there is plenty of evidence for that.

However, the variety of secondary and false spirits that lead him on, in addition to those that are mentioned above, are at times incidentally (fragmented, apart from the perspective of God's Word) valuable: compassion for fellow men, international justice, societal improvement, development of the film arts for the art's sake, and interest in man as a psychological animal. Incidentally valuable as these may be, and though these foci may have greater integrity than the material focus, they all honor the creation rather than the creator.

And in a sense, all men, Christians included, are prisoners of the creation.

God's Creational Word surrounds us. Some of the laws in this Word we cannot violate, but obedience to many of the laws is a matter of choice. While you may defy the law of gravity, you will not break it; but you may defy and violate the laws of compassion, marriage, and justice—often without fear of immediate punishment. But respond you will, one way or the other, faithfully or unfaithfully. And that response, even when it is most faithful, can be no more complete than the extent to which the form is developed. If you believe, for example, that a film had to be divided into five acts, as Seneca divided his tragedies, you would be limited. As drama developed, certain limitations were abandoned in the form of expression.

But let's put the matter positively. Stereophonic sound has opened up new psychological possibilities in the film. The Fellini notion that every man is a potential actor in the wide screen of impres-

(Continued on page 3)



# FILM POWER

by Dave DeGroot

I fell in love with Julie Christie four years ago while watching "Dr. Zhivago." I know a 41-year-old woman who feels the same way about Paul Newman. Whenever a Newman show comes to town she gets her teenage daughter to babysit while she drags her husband with her to the theater. I've seen Leonard Whiting plastered on walls in the girls' dorms and Peter Fonda displayed in the guys' dorm. Elliot Gould's heroic face was recently depicted on the front cover of *Time* under the inscription, "Star for an Uptight Age." Last month Detroit judge Joseph Gillis advised lawyers involved in a murder case to see the film "Joe," and then excluded people who had seen the film from jury duty in the same case.

Movies aren't a simple kind of entertainment—they are complex, powerful, mind-bending tools that effect us more deeply than we realize. Until enough time has passed for us to gain a better understanding of the medium, the word is "handle with extreme caution!"

A major factor that contributes to the power of a film is "star identification." Many critics have been mistakenly proclaiming the death of the Hollywood "star system." Stars, they say, no longer effect audiences the way they did ten, twenty, or even thirty years ago. Meanwhile, various

popular magazines continue to devote prime space to Barbara Hershey, Sophia Loren, Ali MacGraw, Don Sutherland, Dennis Hopper, and Gould; mid-night rap shows feature the stars; posters put their faces within easy reach of anybody with an extra \$1.50, and theaters are doing a thriving business. While tastes may be changing slightly, the fact remains that the beautiful bodies we see on the screen hold a powerful attraction. As long as the motion picture is a form of art, the figure of the celluloid hero—often a self-sufficient, world-defying man whose head "is bloody but unbowed" in the face of rotten circumstances—will be a thing thousands of people will see as symbols of themselves. Audiences will always identify with the stars.

Star identification is nothing new in cinema. The first movie fan magazines began in 1913, almost as soon as movies were born. Gladys Smith, who used the screen name, "Mary Pickford," was referred to by Thomas Edison as "the sweetheart of the Americans, and before she retired in 1932 she had gained a world-wide following. Two years after Charlie Chaplin appeared in his first film his name became a household word. Stores carried Chaplin dolls and Chaplin toys, the "Chaplin Walk" became a popular dance step, children used his name in playground rhymes, and newspapers carried Charlie Chaplin comic strips. When Rudolph

Valentino wore a fake beard as a publicity stunt, there were protests from women and barbers all over North America. Joan Crawford, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich were audience pleasers in the '30's, and their names are still familiar today, even to young people two generations removed. Contemporary examples of the power of stars over the movie-going public have already been mentioned, but another example of add to the list would be the death of Marilyn Monroe, an occurrence that was mentioned the Sunday morning that it happened on many Christian Reformed pulpits.

These screen heroes are powerful stuff. Handle with caution!

Since I'm a lousy judge of things that go on in other peoples' heads, I'll have to open up my own mind to suggest the intense power of star identification in film. Speaking personally, I can say that I tend to identify strongly with particular people represented in movies, especially when I'm egotistical enough to think I can see a little of myself in them. In any case, Omar Sharif, playing Yuri in "Dr. Zhivago" touched me deeply, as did Sergei Bondarachuk in the Russian version of "War and Peace." I felt like I had been hit in the brain when Ratso (Dustin Hoffman) died at the end of "Midnight Cowboy," and I really felt big-hearted when the Pope (Anthony Quinn) dedicated all the wealth of the Roman Catholic Church to world peace in "The Shoes of the Fisherman." (I am not trying to defend these films, and I am certainly not suggesting that everyone should see them or would react to them the same way that I did: I mention these stars as examples of a case of star identification that happened to me.)

Last fall I discussed "Easy Rider" with a long-haired friend, and asked him what he thought of the oppressed, brutalized, and finally murdered star of the show, Peter Fonda. "Man, I was Peter Fonda!" was the response. Last year a young man traveling by motorcycle across the Midwest stopped for a night in Sioux Center and mentioned that he had gotten his cycle two weeks after seeing "Easy Rider." And everyone has seen the highly modified "choppers" made popular by Captain America in the same show. Some pretty intense reactions!

No matter how loudly we protest that movies have no deep psychological meaning for us, we have to admit that they can initiate action or serve as catalysts to set off a reaction which has been churning around inside of us. So what happens when we sit back in a theater (with the sole purpose of being entertained) and soak in characters like Cool Hand Luke (rebellious, proud, and disrespectful of authority), Arlo Guthrie (arrogant and bitingly cynical), Captain America, Myra Breckenridge, Benjamin "The Graduate," or James Bond? Whatever reactions these characters could elicit would probably be unhealthy for the Christian! Granted, all these characters are easily identified with a godless life because they flaunt blatant things like drugs, sex, or violence, but we can't say that characters in "G" or "GP" rated shows are better servants of God because they don't display shocking forms of immorality. (What about the revenge theme in "Ben Hur" or the careless, god-denying morality in "Airport" or "Paint Your Wagon"?) As Christians, we cannot afford to be influenced easily by every movie we see! In fact, we had better be extremely cautious about being influenced by any movie!

There are certainly other factors besides star identification which effect movie-viewers, but an

## FINE ARTS FILM CONTEST

The 1971 Fine Arts Festival will include a strong emphasis on film. Besides bringing a number of creative films to the campus during the next two months, the Fine Arts Festival Committee is arranging for a speaker who has been involved in the production of Christian films, and is encouraging students to produce original films.

The Fine Arts Film Contest will offer \$200 in cash prizes for films in two categories: high school and college. A number of area public and private high schools are being contacted and encouraged to submit entries for the Festival, and arrangements are also being made for a film contest on the college level.

Rules are much the same for both the high school and the college categories:

1. Films entered in the high school contest must be 8mm or Super 8.
2. Films entered in the college contest may be entered in either the 8mm-Super 8 division or in the 16mm division.
3. Films may be silent or accompanied by tape-recorded sound.
4. No length or subject restrictions, but the Fine Arts Festival Committee retains the right to disqualify films that it decides are "offensive in nature."
5. Student (or students) must produce the creative aspects of the film without professional help.

The Committee has expressed the hope that lack of experience in working with film will not discourage anyone from submitting an entry to the film contest. Since there are a few students in this area who could be called "experienced" in film production, the prize money will probably go to individuals who are attempting to make a film for the first time. Creativity and ambition are the main requirements for this contest!

Winning films will be shown publically during the 1971 Fine Arts Festival sometime between April 26 and May 5.

Deadline for the contest is April 10. For more information or to submit an entry, contact Dave DeGroot, 782 4th Ave. N.E., Sioux Center; 722-1531. A small 8mm camera can also be rented from D. DeGroot.



**FILM ACCIDENTS** (Continued from page 1)  
sionism does open up new possibilities in the economic film expression, as well as provide additional income for hog butchers ("The Satyricon," 1970). This is the accident of irresponsibility. The humanist film maker responds to the laws of God in film making, directing his focus irresponsibly; and as he does so, he opens up dimensions in the art that were not known before. These are film accidents for God! Denying his creator, the film maker finds he is a prisoner nevertheless—a prisoner of creation. His freedom is no freedom, but his efforts are not all in vain.

Two questions. When will the Christian, the truly freed prisoner, develop the film arts responsibly, before the face of God, and I may add, without dependence on accident? A second question: can we discern the irresponsible foci of the contemporary film artist and sort out of the mess the "accidents" for the Lord?

**FILM POWER** (Continued from page 2)  
adequate presentation of them is too involved to consider at this time.

Acted upon by a variety of factors, audiences are moved by films. When one of the first full-length feature films, "Birth of a Nation" was released in 1914 it caused riots in many American cities. The director of the show, D. W. Griffith, was a die-hard Southerner who presented the Ku Klux Klan sympathetically and saw Negroes as black devils or Uncle Toms. Early in the century, Lenin stated that "of all the arts, the cinema is the most important for us." The result of his idea was strong support by the Russian government of "acceptable" films, powerful tools for propaganda. As late as 1967, the Russian government sank tens of millions of dollars into the production of a high-quality, seven-hour monster, "War and Peace." Great Britain and Italy also realized the power of film and invested heavily in it as a propaganda tool. In 1956, President Sukarno of Indonesia told a group of Hollywood producers that he regarded them as radicals and revolutionaries who had greatly hastened political change in the East, President Nixon reportedly had personal prints of "Patton" delivered to the Western White House.

Christians are slowly awaking to the wonderful power of film when it is used in a constructive way. World Wide Films produced "The Restless Ones" a number of years ago and found it to be instrumental in many conversions. (This film seems to be the object of some criticism in a few circles because of its "phoniness" and "romantic-type, happily-ever-after ending," but it would be good to bear three points in mind: though the film is dated and should be respectfully retired, many church groups keep trying to squeeze a little more benefit from it; it is one of the first major steps toward the production of hard-hitting Christian films; and in its prime, the film was used by the Holy Spirit.) Under the direction of Jim Collier, World Wide also produced the successful evangelistic films, "Two a Penny," "In His Steps," and "For Pete's Sake." Other Christian film-makers have been making the first steps toward harnessing the power of the medium for Christ; "Without Onion," "Flipside," and "Downbeat" are random examples. Bob Jones University in South Carolina boasts the largest privately-owned film set-up in the United States. And now comes the big 35mm picture, "Cross and the Switchblade," starring Pat Boone, which hit Grand Rapids hard when it opened there. Yes, Christian films can be powerful God-glorifying force, and future years will hold exciting developments in that area. Rather than careless criticism from the Christian community, the Christian film companies need prayer and support.

The purpose of this article was to emphasize the power of film, and I suppose I could sign off at this point without alluding to the problem that these

ideas uncover. That would be like sneaking out the back door, though.

"Should a Christian view any secular films if their power is potentially so dangerous?" The simplest answer would be a blanket statement of either "yes" or "no." Before the Synod of 1966, the Christian Reformed Church took the negative position. After the decision "opening the door" to theaters, many young people seem to have reacted by taking the position that the Christian can see any and all films without suffering unhealthy effects. The first attitude, I believe, is unnecessarily narrow because it legalistically prohibits the viewing of some films which may be beneficial, and it sets the stage for ridiculous double standards regarding films in theaters vs. films on television, films in Alton vs. films in the Dordt gym, or entertainment films vs. documentary films.

But the second attitude, that of indiscriminately seeing any films that happens to be around, is deadly. I hope this article served to indicate that.

The answer to the problem, therefore, is a matter of making individual decisions about particular films. If we take the situation seriously, we should read reviews and try to form ideas about a film even before we see it. Going to a show merely because it is the only one in the area on Friday night is inexcusable for the conscientious Christian. One in the theater, we should never let our guard down and let a film soak easily into our minds. We aren't all capable of intellectual criticism of what we see, but we can form personal judgments about what is right or wrong according to God's Word. If possible,

## Cannon

Published monthly by students of Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa. Comments and opinions about the ideas expressed in this publication are welcome. Address correspondence to Cannon, 782 4th Ave. N.E., Sioux Center, Iowa 51250.

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we should discuss the film with other Christians afterward. We should be extremely cautious about recommending a particular film to anyone, and we should never look down on fellow Christians who choose not to see a show.

I'll honestly admit that there are some films I regret seeing (some I mentioned in this article), and many of us have had similar experiences. There will probably be more mistakes in the future. But film is a powerful medium; careless attitude toward it can be deadly.

There is another answer to the problem of viewing secular films: Christians should begin producing more and better-quality films which present Christian attitudes toward life. Strongly evangelistic films serve a purpose, but there is also a need for films emphasizing Christian themes in the areas of family life, man-woman relationships, vocations, stewardship, and so forth. (Christian film companies have been treating these areas—Davarca Films is one company that comes to my mind—but the products so far have been short, pedantic little creations, not the full-length features that pull crowds into theaters.) Imagine a Christian "Love Story," and the effect it would have on audiences! The prospects for Christian films are becoming better each year. More skill is being gained in the medium, and more churches are becoming aware of the need to support efforts in mass communication. In the future looms the prospects of video-tape revolution which would put film-making (actually tape-making) on a much lower price-scale, easily in reach of church budgets.

Let's pray that God will lead us in this exciting direction, that we may harness film power for Him.

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# Sense and Sensibility

by Nick Van Til

By using the above title I don't mean to poach on the preserves of Jane Austin. Rather, I am using it as a plug for the development of the film arts among us. I believe we can use the media of sense to touch and change sensibilities. The best way to change the direction of action is to change the direction of feeling. This can be done best by those media which most effectively affect feeling.

For example, when you read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* or saw the movie version of the book, you undoubtedly had your sensibility as to the plight of the Dust Bowl migrant changed to one of greater sympathy and consideration. Today the social criticism is so general that it assumes we are caught in the malise of a completely enveloping "establishment" which must be removed because it is also completely impersonal and diffused. Some feel so frustrated that they can only react in rage. To use another figure, some have concluded that the social fabric is so flawed that it must be taken apart warp from woof and completely rewoven. But where do we begin? What pattern shall we choose? And how shall we do the job?

Both theologians and hippies, depending on their definition of the term, have suggested that we must get back to personal relationships based on "Love, sweet love". In some, this has generated a kind of irrational optimism, while others have succumbed to a kind of fatalistic euphoria. Many "Play possum" in the presence of problems for which they have no solutions. Some have given way completely to nihilism. Bombings and terrorism are chosen by those who believe the time is ripe for Marxist revolution.

Among Christians, some, who do not like the "establishment's" life style, have identified themselves in appearance with the non-Christian protestor of the "establishment". By using the avenues of sense to jar sensibilities, they have done little more than to create aversions amongst conservative Christians and cut off communication with them. Some hint rather broadly that conservative and Christian are mutually exclusive terms.

Now the Christian rightfully wants to be identified as "called out". In our culture one should be able to single him out as standing "over-against" the evils of secularism wherever they are found. The Christian should not thoughtlessly accept "establishment" values even if they are often carelessly appropriated by fellow church members. To use a figure, the Christian cannot fill his cup with an elixir stirred together from The Great Society, Democracy, Protestant Ethics, Scientism and a dash of Victorian prudery and presume that he is drinking of "the waters of life".

But how does one who has developed scripturally prophetic sensibilities, get his establishment-oriented fellow Christians to espouse the profundity and radicalism of his biblically directed confession? And how does he communicate this biblical message to his "other-directed" or "turned-off" non-Christian acquaintances?

As to fellow Christians, one will not get the job done through essays which imply in thinly veiled language that those who are not of his own viewpoint most likely are hypocrites. Neither will the non-Christian be touched if one has no more in mind than to increase the decibels by which he puts out the old theological cliches. What is needed is a renewing and a reinvigorating of the deep and interior spring of man's sensibilities: in the Christian these may have atrophied for lack of nourishment; in the non-Christian these are feeding on an ill-conceived love which is no more than worldly lust.

Perhaps we should acknowledge that it is often impossible for the preacher-theologian to get at this sensibility effectively. It will remain untouched by neatly formulated theological propositions, even

though the truth of those propositions are fundamental to the Christian life. Man must be touched experientially and existentially in the depths of his feelings.

It may now be the case that where the preacher-theologian fails we have to call in the assistance of the artist. "What the artist is essentially interested in is the expression, involving judgments but in the most visible and concrete terms, of the life and movement of the soul as it engages with reality outside itself, especially with reality of each current moment of history. I do not think it too much to say . . . . the artist wishes to 'save' that soul in the sense that he wishes to keep its various acts of sensibility straight and real and ever moving with a freedom that really belongs to the children of God." (William F. Lynch S.J., *The Image Industry*, New York, 1956)

It seems to me that Christians have too long neglected the potential of the film arts in this most vital area of human life. Of course, nice pat answers will be no boon to the solution. But, in general, men are moved more by feeling than they are logical formulations and mathematical calculations. So we can use films to suggest the fundamental creational order and sin-deranged disorder of life in the world by presenting the rich and strangely irreducible particulars of existence. It is the perennial mystery of the arts that they say something radically singular,

concrete and individual about some aspect of reality, but at the same time present it in such a way that this concrete singularity becomes resonant of the whole of reality.

So we could use a presentation to the senses which reflects a sensibility that is God-fearing and God-praising. We could use it to get at the fountains of our emotional life to refresh and invigorate us to new and world-changing action. Meanwhile the preacher-theologian will rejoice for the help he is getting in promoting the health of the Christian imagination. Without this the inner life and integrity of the Christian cannot be nourished and developed in joyous spontaneity.

Surely, the preacher needs all the help he can get from artistic men and their effective media to liberate modern man from the deadening weights of the "establishment's" materialism, scientism, secularism and all the further "isms" which would put a blight on his soul, make him a pedestrian plodder, and blind him to the glories and his Creator and the creation. With his senses deadened by the perpetual assault of erotic sights and raucous sounds, man's sensibilities cannot be tuned to hymn the chock-full-of-praise life that he should live. Only Christianly directed films can present the darkling shadows of sin in sufficiently sombre hues so that the glory of grace will shine forth in all its splendor.

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